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C O N F I D E N T I A L BUENOS AIRES 001026

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TAGS: PINR PGOV PREL ELAB AR
SUBJECT: ARGENTINA: THERE'S LIFE AFTER THE CASA ROSADA FOR
CFK'S FORMER CABINET CHIEF

REF: BUENOS AIRES 0802

Classified By: CDA Tom Kelly for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Eight weeks after leaving Argentine President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner's (CFK) administration, former Cabinet Chief Sergio Massa told Polcouns that he parted on good terms with CFK and "not so good terms" with CFK's husband and power behind the throne, former president Nestor Kirchner (NK). Massa said that CFK deferred to her husband on all matters, and that in practice she only took orders, showing no inclination to overrule her husband's policy decisions or countermand his orders to government ministers and their staffs. He said he expected NK to run for president in 2011. Massa conveyed his own intention to run for governor in 2011 and indicated he was already building a team to help him run the province. End summary.

Back to Running Tigre

¶2. (C) Argentine former Cabinet Chief Sergio Massa looked tanned and well-rested when he met with Polcouns September 4, a little over a month after returning to Tigre, the medium-sized city in suburban Buenos Aires where he was elected mayor in 2007 but took a leave of absence to work one year for President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner (CFK). Massa served as Cabinet Chief from July 24, 2008, through July 8, 2009, and returned to his mayor's office in Tigre two weeks later. Although the media had reported that Massa took his family skiing at the southern resort of Bariloche, Massa grinned when Polcouns asked him about the slopes and confessed that he had actually taken his family to a beach resort in northeastern Brazil. He was clearly pleased that he had pulled a fast one on the media.

Greatly Relieved

¶3. (C) Massa stressed that he did not miss his highly visible Casa Rosada position one bit. The polls, he said, indicated he had left the Kirchner administration with his reputation and popularity intact. Tensions between Massa and former President Nestor Kirchner were rumored to be high, and Massa confirmed that to us in private. He claimed he parted on good terms with CFK and "not so good terms" with CFK's husband and power behind the throne, former president Nestor Kirchner (NK). Massa said that CFK deferred to her husband on all matters, and that in practice she had become nothing more than a subaltern who took orders and had no ability or inclination to overrule her husband's policy decisions or countermand his orders to government ministers and their staffs. He also said that his replacement as Cabinet Chief, Anibal Fernandez, 52, seemed to be making more enemies than allies, and that Interior Minister Florencio Randazzo, 45, who a year earlier shared the limelight with Massa as one of CFK's most visible spokesmen, was a spent force in the administration.

Kirchner Gearing Up for 2011

¶4. (C) Massa described NK as a master tactician who enjoyed a good fight and was ultimately seized with acquiring and asserting power for its own sake but did not have a vision nor the coalition-building skills needed to carry out an agenda. Massa said he believed NK was intent on running for president in 2011, and that Daniel Scioli, 52, would run for re-election as governor of the province of Buenos Aires on the Kirchner ticket. Asked about rumors that NK and Scioli might switch -- i.e., Scioli for president, and NK for governor -- Massa said that might be a fallback plan. He said Scioli was stuck between a rock and a hard place, expressing some pity for Scioli's inability to extricate himself from Kirchner's grasp, particularly as the province is headed toward a severe fiscal crunch that will require a bailout from the national government.

Massa's Plans for 2011

¶5. (C) Massa was emphatic that he would not take the congressional seat he won in the June 28 elections, preferring instead to establish a strong record as mayor of Tigre as a launching pad for his own gubernatorial bid in ¶2011. He spoke at length about the need to build a capable team that he could take with him to govern the province. He noted that CFK's new minister of economy, Amado Boudou, seemed to be doomed for disaster because he did not have even a small team of trusted advisers to help him develop policy and run that portfolio.

¶6. (C) In that connection, Massa said he had hired Santiago Montoya, the well-regarded former head of the provincial revenue service (ARBA) who lost his job when he incurred Kirchner's wrath by refusing to run as a candidate on the Kirchner slate in the June 28 congressional midterm elections. Massa also made a point of picking up his cell phone and calling Emilio Monzo, the provincial agriculture secretary whom Scioli had fired the week before, also at Kirchner's behest. Massa's end of the phone conversation made it clear he and Monzo were on good terms, and at the end of the conversation, Massa said he was looking to find a place for Monzo in his city administration.

Labor Problems in Tigre

¶7. (C) Polcouns asked Massa about intractable labor problems at a food processing plant in Tigre owned by Kraft. Massa said three times that he believed the company had been in the right when it dismissed 155 workers for failing to show up to work in July and then taking plant managers hostage in July. He implied that the labor leaders at the plant were extortionist and unreasonable. He made clear that he did not see a useful role for himself in resolving the standoff, and he was at a loss for predicting how it might end.

Comment

¶8. (C) As noted reftel, Massa, 37, is smart, charismatic, and well-liked, with an open, inclusive style that did not fit well with the paranoid, combative Kirchners. He is generally pro-American and, unlike others in the GOA, did not resort to any cheap shots against the United States. Like his predecessor, Alberto Fernandez, he emerged relatively unscathed from his service in the Kirchner administration. He is focused now on positioning himself for the governor's race in 2011. In the interim, he clearly enjoys his job as mayor and is highly popular in Tigre. Ambitious and young, he already has an impressive record of public service (five years as head of ANSES, the Argentine social security administration; a year as mayor of Tigre; and a year as Cabinet Chief). Most likely, he sees himself as a long-term

presidential contender, and we would put him in the same generational league as other promising presidential prospects such as Salta governor Manuel Urtubey, 40, and Chaco governor Jorge Capitanich, 44.

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